

Merrimack School District Budget Committee

Minutes

January 6, 2026

Present: K. Bernier, M. Berry, D. Coakley, A. dePreaux, J. Grobecker, J. McCormack, C. Mower (late), S. Rand, H. Robitaille, A. Santoriello, B. Trant, and School Board Liaison J. Hardy

Excused: S. Albuquerque

Also Present: Chief Educational Officer B. Olsen, Assistant Superintendent for Business M. Shevenell, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum K. Scholand, School Board Chair L. Peters, Maintenance Director T. Touseau and Director of Student Services C. Silva

H. Robitaille called the meeting to order at 6:00 PM and led those present in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Public Participation

There was none.

School Board Budget Recommendation

H. Robitaille told the Committee that the School Board had voted its FY26-27 Budget Recommendation last night, a copy of which was in the meeting packet. She asked School Board Chair L. Peters to discuss the School Board Recommendation with the Committee.

L. Peters told the Committee that the School Board had asked the Administration to “right size the District” looking at enrollment trends, class sizes, number of staff and transportation costs as well as keep expenses in areas that directly affect student instruction be level funded as possible and reduce discretionary spending by a minimum of 5%.

L Peters said the School Board reviewed several possible cost reduction ideas and s explained that a survey of area schools by the high school Athletic Director found that “Pay to Play” really does not work. She also said it’s going to take an in-depth study to determine possible transportation savings so that cannot be addressed in the FY 26-27 budget proposal which will be undertaken next year. And finally she said that after looking at proposed class sizes and state maximum class size

standards, the School Board voted to recommend adding back one 4th grade teacher at Masticola Elementary which results in a School Board budget recommendation of \$96,917,871. She explained this 4th grade teaching position also has to be added to the default budget so the new default budget is \$96,964,324. She noted the proposed budget is \$46,453 below the default budget.

L. Peters mentioned that the School Board will be proposing several warrant articles:

- A new MTA contract which includes a concession about staff paying toward their site of service plan. She also said the union will offer several on-line training options.
- Adding \$150,000 to the Roof Capital Reserve Fund.
- Adding \$50,000 to the Pavement Capital Reserve Fund.
- An article about open enrollment.
- The usual article about accepting gifts of property.

Discussion included:

- Total enrollment is declining, but while there was a precipitous decline immediately after Covid, the decline is leveling off. The projected overall decline of 12 – 15 students for next year is not a precipitous decline.
- Some members asked questions about the default budget.
- A. dePreaux made a MOTION to end discussion about the default budget until later. Second: J. Grobecker.
MOTION PASSED 7 – 0 – 4. (Abstentions: A. Santoriello, J. McCormack, B. Trant, M. Berry)
(C. Mower arrived at this time and did not vote.)
- The Committee was told that questions about the 3 new part-time Administrative Special Services positions and the elimination of a literacy coordinator position should be addressed to the Superintendent during the District-Wide budget presentation.

Department Budget Reviews

Maintenance

Department Head: T. Touseau

Committee Liaisons: D. Coakley, J. Grobecker, S. Rand, A. Santoriello

H. Robitaille introduced Maintenance Director T. Touseau and called on Liaison Team lead D. Coakley.

D. Coakley thanked T. Touseau and H. Robitaille for their efforts to arrange the liaison meeting since he was unable to attend. He said that J. Grobecker would be giving the liaison summary.

T. Touseau thanked every member of the Committee, especially the Committee liaisons who met with him, for their time. He told the Committee he said wanted to point out that utility costs in the proposed Maintenance budget were significantly higher than the current budget.

J. Grobecker told the Committee that she, K. Bernier and H. Robitaille met with T. Touseau and went through the budget line by line. She said T. Touseau answered all their questions and stated many budget lines are level funded but if an increase in costs is expected, he uses a three year average plus 5% to determine the budget cost to propose. She reported that Maintenance has several contracts covering services for HVAC (Honeywell), sports field maintenance, camera maintenance, and parking lot snow removal. She noted that the Maintenance department is actively working on developing and hiring trained groundskeepers for next year's budget. She also said that the District has found that it is more cost effective to have contracts for specialized tasks. She explained that the OT line in the Maintenance budget covers custodial staff in a building when the building is used outside of school hours (before school, nights and weekends.) She also said that Reeds Ferry Elementary is the only school that is still using oil and the middle school is the only school that is not using LED lighting.

T. Touseau said that some of the building custodians work for contractors and some are District staff. He told the Committee that Maintenance salary lines must reflect the number of employees listed in the MESSA contract – even though the positions are vacant. The unexpended amount in these salary lines is used to pay for the contracted maintenance service costs. T. Touseau said they have looked at solar panels and will continue to do so, but at this time, they are not cost effective because of snow loads on the roofs.

Discussion included:

- Maintenance has two teams: groundskeepers plus day and night custodians.
- The District has an agreement with MYA to use school facilities for free.
- Maintenance staff clears snow from school sidewalks.
- The budget line for water at MES includes watering the fields in the Masticola complex.
- Rubbish collection goes out to bid.
- The surveillance cameras have helped to decrease vandalism.

- The PTOs have insurance to cover the volunteers assisting in the schools.
- Using volunteers to prepare and maintain the athletic fields represents a liability risk to the District plus additional staff would be needed to supervise and manage the volunteers to ensure fields are “ready.” However, the District will look into whether athletic support group insurance could cover volunteer field maintenance workers.
- The Honeywell lease agreement will be paid off in 2029. Part of the system is 24/7 notification alerts about air quality issues or other problems which notifies Honeywell to send out technicians if needed to fix problems. There are two budget lines for the Honeywell contract because the District pays to buy new filters but Honeywell pays for the labor to replace them.
- Maintenance supplies are put out to bid and the District accepts the lowest bid but the District purposely purchases 1 ply toilet paper because old plumbing lines get clogged.
- Vandalism at the schools has decreased due to the number of cameras in the schools and these cameras have reduced insurance cost.
- Electric kilowatt charge is put out to bid to get the cheapest charge, but the electric delivery charge is a standard charge.

Student Services

Department Head: Colleen Silva

Committee Liaisons: K. Bernier, A. dePreaux, A. Santoriello, M. Berry

K. Bernier told the Committee that the liaison team was joined by H. Robitaille and J. Grobecker at their meeting.

K. Bernier said members asked about grants and state aid. She explained that state aid used to be called catastrophic aid and is a reimbursement for a percentage of the expenditures for I.E.P costs over \$75,000. She stated that the aid is received the year after the cost is incurred. She noted that this year’s aid will be about \$400,000 less than what it should be because the Education commissioner lowered the reimbursement percentage. She also told the Committee that the District is now working to set up a program to apply for Medicaid reimbursement as well as IDEA grant funds but part of the problem is paperwork.

K. Bernier stated that Student Services has a new position: Student Services Finance Administrator. This new position will provide improved fiscal oversight of the various Student Services programs. She also reported that the District had been using Special Education evaluators who were unqualified but now has a \$1.6 million dollar contract with a company to do evaluations. Further, she said that the

District has done a para-educator audit to ensure the number of para-educators employed by the District aligns with the I.E.P. needs.

C. Silva told the Committee that members of the liaison team had given her some questions to research and she had some answers:

- There are 766 students who have I.E.P.s.
- Twenty-two students were discharged/exited from the program before graduating school during 24-25 school year.
- The percent of students who met the objectives of their I.E.P.s at the three year evaluation is not data that can be collected by the I.E.P. process.
- Administration is currently reviewing the para-audit report and will provide information on areas that can be publicly shared to the Committee as well as more information about the parameters of the audit.

B. Olson told the Committee that the funds to pay for the new Student Services Finance Administrator were taken from the line that was in the budget for the position of an Assistant Student Services Director which was eliminated.

Committee discussion included:

- The District carries insurance for Special Services which is part of the legal line in the District-Wide budget.
- What is the difference between gen-ed tutoring and special-ed tutoring and are appropriate amounts proposed in the lines for these services? The District used to use a contracting company for tutors but is now using District employees.
- Special Services provides C.P.I. (Crisis Prevention Institute) training for about 100 staff members, which aids in non-violent interventions.
- Many school districts hire a contractor to deal with Medicaid analysis, other requirements and reimbursement paperwork.
- When preparing the budget, M. Shevenell enters an estimated amount of catastrophic aid.
- Special Services is 23% of the entire School District budget.
- Social and Emotional Learning (S.E.L.) is not part of Special Services but Committee members want data to support continuing S.E.L. programs and as well as an understanding of the difference between Guidance and S.E.L. Is there an S.E.L. screener?
- The K – 12 Director of Counseling position which was responsible for data gathering regarding S.E.L. has been eliminated.
- Schools are very different today than schools 20 or even 10 years ago.
- Red Cat/Hearing & Listening Equipment

- o Some classrooms have permanent (built-in) systems. Administration will research which ones and where they are.
- o Other classrooms have portable systems which often need parts.
- o These systems help both disabled and regular students.
- o Is someone overseeing or reviewing placement of students that, per I.E.P., need hearing/listening equipment into Red Cat equipped classrooms?
- A list of Out-of-District venues and the average cost of each was read to the Committee.
- Special Service staff is always trying to find ways to provide appropriate programming to keep students who have I.E.P.s in-district.

Updates

H. Robitaille told the members

- S. Albuquerque was excused for this meeting.
- The Technology Department budget review has been moved to January 27th.
- Liaison Team Leads need to turn in the minutes of their liaison meetings.
- M. Shevenell had provided a Q2 budget update and would be providing an electronic excel version.
- Instead of a holding a working session, members should make a note of items in the Maintenance and Special Services budgets that they might want the Committee to follow up on at or before the Committee Work Session.

Approval of Prior Minutes

M. Berry made MOTION to approve the Minutes of December 9, 2025. Second: K. Bernier.

MOTION PASSED: 9 – 0 – 3. (Abstaining: S. Rand, A. Santoriello and J. Hardy)

Public Participation

Lori Peters (Newton Street) thanked M. Berry for pointing out how school culture has changed over the last decade. She shared a recent study on Social and Emotional Learning (S.E.L.) in schools which showed that using S.E.L. in schools has resulted in significant improvement with outcomes.

H. Robitaille told the Committee that there are a lot of different ideas and viewpoints on a committee as large as the Budget Committee. She said she wants to give each member a chance to speak and asked that the members treat each other with respect.

Budget Committee Minutes, 1-6-26, continued

J. McCormack made a MOTION to adjourn. Second: D. Coakley

MOTION PASSED unanimously.

H. Robitaille adjourned at 8:43 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Pat Heinrich